

Although we do not propose Wordle as a tool that would be a singular focus in a writing activity, as the prior examples show, it could provide the basis for conversations between peers or students and teachers. In a recent survey of Wordle users nearly two-thirds of respondents indicated that they had “learned something new about the text” in their use of Wordle and over half indicated they had “confirmed their understanding” of the text (Viégas, Wattenberg, & Feinberg, 2009).

Supporting Creative Writing and Publishing with Technology

Like many middle school students, Eileen Skarecki’s Columbia Middle School students in New Jersey read the popular adolescent novel, *The Pigman*. In Skarecki’s words, the novel “leaves the reader hanging.” Her response? Have students write a final chapter, and post the submissions on the Internet for others to read and respond to.

The National Commission on Writing posits that using technology tools can help motivate writers because often an aspect of technology-based writing is publishing the writing in some form (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007). All the tools in this chapter provide some type of innovative, yet meaningful, support for different aspects of writing. But perhaps the greatest growth in writing-related technologies are those that allow one to *publish* one’s creative written work on the Internet. For instance, a recent study from the Pew Research Centers shows that 64 percent of teenagers who are online have participated in at least one content-creating activity on the Internet. Further, 28 percent have created their own online journal or blog—an increase from 19 percent in 2004 (Lenhart et al., 2007). This trend is all part of what one media and culture expert calls the “society of authorship” (Rushkoff, 2004) where any person with Internet access can contribute his or her ideas to the body of materials on the Internet.

This simple activity of placing one’s work on the Web for public access inspires many students to take their work more seriously and to engage in a level of reflection about their work that is otherwise rare. It may also cause them to write with a purpose, to think critically about what they write, to read what others have produced, and to compare their own work to the work of others. In addition to this new level of reflection inspired by Web publishing, it is possible to design activities that cause students to be more reflective—to think about their work and the work of others in ways that lead to academic growth. The next few sections of this chapter explore how the creative process of writing can be supported and meaningfully enhanced with technology tools—some of which support this creative process and others that simply provide a public forum for student work—which may in and of itself lend to the students’ development.

Using Blogs to Publish Ideas

Blogs—short for “web logs”—are a means of enhancing and supporting meaningful communication between learners. A blog—with its read and write functionalities—typifies Web 2.0. Says a technology coordinator for a Florida school district, “Blogs started Web 2.0 as we know it, and brought us into the era of the read/write Web” (as cited in Riedel, 2010). A blog

is a type of website that allows for the easy creation, updates, and nearly instant publishing of content of the author's choosing (Richardson, 2010). When blogs were first introduced, they were predominantly intended to be simply personal diaries without any between-user interaction or commenting. This initial lack of interaction is what differentiated them from wikis.

However, since those early days, the purpose and function of blogs have evolved with many blogs now being highly interactive spaces. Readers post responses to blog entries, creating opportunities for dialogue rather than a one-sided monologue. Blog writers can link to multiple websites, including links to other blogs that might substantiate or refute the opinions expressed in one's own blog. The structure of blogs is reverse chronology, with the most recent entry appearing at the top of the blog webpage. Common features of blogs include the ability to add permanent links allowing other websites to link directly to one's blog, archiving of posts, features that post a link from a currently browsed site directly to a user's blog, and the ability to add a search engine to a blog, making it possible for users to search blog content. The public and published nature of blogs, plus the ability to comment on another's blog post, makes them a powerful communication tool, but the primarily written-word nature of blogs can help support writing tasks as well.

Why Blog?

The uses of blogs in educational settings are varied and range from an entry portal to a particular teacher's classroom to individually based student writing products. For instance, a student might take on the persona of a character from a novel or a historical situation and create blog posts in that persona. Before providing some in-depth examples of blog educational applications, let's briefly examine the underlying rationales for using blogs. Like the uses of blogs, the purported reasons for using them are quite varied. In a recent publication, Richardson (2010) proposes several potential instructional benefits of students participating in blogging activities some of which are summarized and illustrated with examples here:

- *Providing classroom experiences beyond the "walls" of the classroom.* The Internet-posted nature of blogs provides the opportunity for students to connect with other learners, and experts, who may not be available within their own class or building settings. High school teacher Micah Mathis describes that he used his "mhs psychology blog" (www.mhpsychology.blogspot.com) with his students to help get them to further research material that they did not cover directly in class. He formatted the blog posts in such a way that his students had to do extra research via the Internet or apply some of the concepts they learned in class to the real world in order to participate.
- *Posting on a blog may appeal to different learning styles.* This argument is similar to other asynchronous forms of expression (e.g., online discussion forums); students who may be reluctant to speak up in class may find a "voice" in blog postings that can be made on their own time. Ultimately, this may allow for more complete participation by all students. Mathis's other objective was to encourage students who wouldn't normally participate in class discussions. Some students had a fear of talking in public or felt time pressures in class to express their feelings and thoughts. Mathis said, "It allowed students who needed more processing time to respond to have as much as they needed to participate in the class's online discussion."

- *Blogging could enhance the expertise of the blogger on the targeted subject.* Referring back to Figure 1.1, blogging can engage several—if not all—of the characteristics of meaningful learning (e.g., active, constructive, intentional, authentic, cooperative). If a student is developing a blog on, say, the benefits and costs of recycling in her community, the act of constructing blog postings can require her to develop and synthesize expertise in that domain. Richardson (2010) argues that the student is actually creating a “database” of knowledge on the topic. We may not go so far as to agree with that (as a blog is not keyed or indexed like a database), however creating blog postings can be a mechanism for student knowledge construction and synthesis as he or she researches and makes her points in the blog. Further, the necessity of replying to postings—and perhaps revising or defending one’s position—could result in knowledge revision, or conceptual change which has been shown to be a powerful form of learning.
- *Blogging and the evidence of outside readers and their comments can be motivating to writers.* Anne Davis, an elementary teacher whose fourth- and fifth-grade students wrote blogs that were read by high school students who mentored them, reported, “Having an outside audience really made a difference to them. They couldn’t believe that someone else would care what they wrote” (Falloon, 2005).

Other potential benefits from blogging have been proposed and include promoting self- and critical reflection, promoting collaboration and the development of virtual communities between learners (Cook & Schwier, 2008), and promoting analogical thinking (Eide Neurolearning Blog, 2005).

Before moving on to some examples of the creative ways blogging is being used in educational settings to support writing, we feel it necessary to point out that while there is great enthusiasm for the potential benefits of blogging, the research on the impact of blogging on students is in its infancy and most data at this point is strictly anecdotal. A couple of notable exceptions are recent studies from the Pew Internet and American Life Project that showed that teen bloggers are more prolific than their counterparts (Lenhart et al., 2007), and a study with a small sample of high school bloggers that found they felt blogging helped them to better articulate their ideas, and that blogging helped them to *begin* writing their papers (Ramaswami, 2008). Given the difficulty of the “blank page,” this latter result is somewhat notable.

Examples of Writing and Publishing with Blogs

Bob Sprankle, a former third- and fourth-grade teacher at Wells Elementary in Wells, Maine, is a 2005 Edublog Award winner. “Room 208,” his class blog site (<http://bobsprankle.com/blog/index.html>), illustrates how young writers use personal blogs to publish and share their ideas with each other as well anyone in the blogosphere (see Figure 7.6). In her blog, Elizabeth has posted a story she wrote: “The Hamster and the Mouse.” Elizabeth also posted a drawing of a dragon.

The community of viewers who visited Elizabeth’s blog provided her with lots of positive feedback. For instance, one reader commented on the way Elizabeth portrayed the emotion of fear in the dragon and suggested that she might write a story about this drawing. This type of “motivational” feedback is one of the strengths of blogs for young writers.

Figure 7.6

Blog Entries of Elizabeth's Picture and Story


01.Room 208 PODCAST!
02.News from the Students
03.News from Mr. S
04.Links of the Week
05.NEWSLETTERS
Ashley's Corner
Bailey's Corner
Cassidy's Stuff
Chris's Corner
Christian's Corner
Elizabeth's Things
Emily J's Page
Mailey's Work!
Marc's Work
Mary's Corner
Sage's Corner
Tyler's Work
Zach's Corner
Mr. S's Writing

GO TO THE BLOG

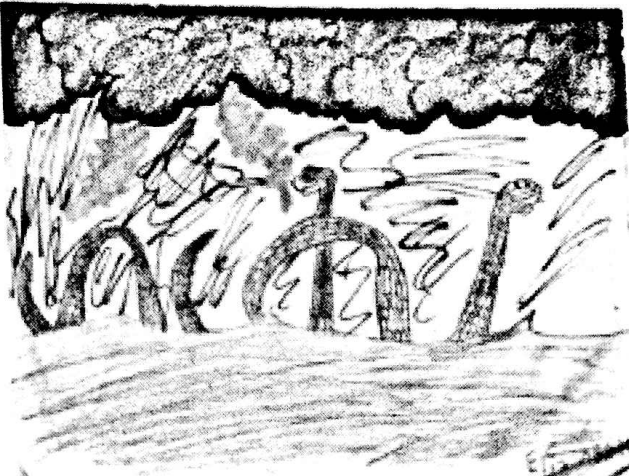
**Click here for the
Poetry Blog**
(written by
Room 208 & 209)

ROOM 208 PHOTO CLUB

**Click here
for Room 208
Photo Club!**



DRAGONS BY ELIZABETH



by Elizabeth

Posted at 06:24 AM [Room 208](#) [Read More](#)

[Comments \(8\)](#) | [Trackback \(0\)](#)

Mon - April 25, 2005

THE HAMSTER AND THE MOUSE

The Hamster and the Mouse
By Elizabeth

Many have difficulty starting a writing task or are concerned that no one is interested in what they write. Such feedback can affirm young writers' concepts of themselves as conveyors of ideas, engage them in conversation with a purposeful community of other writers, and encourage learners to reflect on their work.

When considering blogging to develop writing skills, Richardson (2010) describes how blogging—when done effectively and thoroughly—may be considered “connective writing.” He describes connective writing as a writing form that “forces those who do it to read carefully and critically, that demands clarity and cogency in its construction, that is done for a wide audience, and that links to the sources of the ideas” (p. 28). The Newly Ancient blog (www.newlyancient.com) from an individual teenaged blogger in the Northeast United States illustrates some aspects of “connective writing.” Figure 7.7 shows a posting that discusses his hopes for then President-elect Obama.

The example illustrates how such blog writing must start with reading and synthesis. Although the blogger does express personal ideas and hopes (“I hope President-elect

Figure 7.7

Newly Ancient Posting Illustrating Connective Writing

One of my favorite things about President-elect Obama is that he is the first president to truly understand the power of technology—to a large extent, it got him elected. Already, he is beginning to bring his powerful technology platform into government. I hope by that the end of his term we will see government data opened up with accessible and non-proprietary formats (like XML) which can be accessed by all citizens. The availability of this data will truly give news organizations, technologists, and students new ways to easily and effectively monitor government activity. Ethan Bodnar has written an excellent letter which reflects these principles and offers specific advice on what to do. Thankfully, these changes can easily be implemented, given the right team, and are (or should be) decidedly nonpartisan. I hope President-elect Obama learns from his success with technology on the campaign trail and brings that same edge to government.

Obama . . .”) the posting does much more than that as the posting proposes a premise and links to other sources.

The class blog, “Te Ao O Tamaki” (<http://teaotamaki.blogspot.com>), from a school in New Zealand illustrates a more traditional use of blogging as a central place where students’ classroom work is published, improved, and commented on. The teacher posting shown in Figure 7.8 illustrates two characteristics of how blogs can successfully be used in classes.

Figure 7.8

Teacher’s Blog Showing Initial Posting Structures Task for Students

Tuesday, May 18, 2010

Year 10 Cultural Perspectives: Text 1—Boy Overboard/Themes

Write one paragraph on what YOU think is the most important idea in the novel *Boy Overboard*.

In your paragraph you need to make sure that you follow the Paragraph Structure that we have been working on as a class.

1. S—statement.
2. E—explain your statement.
3. E—example of your statement [quote].
4. E—explain what your example shows.

By doing this, you will be giving yourself preparation on what to write for your formal essay for the novel.

Work hard and enjoy!

First, the teacher has provided structure for the week's blogging activities that involves a writing assignment associated with a book the class is reading (see Figure 7.8). He clearly articulates that their initial posting should include the five elements of writing a good paragraph that they have been studying in class. Second, he has provided an additional purpose for the blog posting—that it will help them to prepare to write their formal essay about this novel. The blog continued to build on the novel reading task over the next few weeks providing students with further opportunities to work on their analysis of the novel, post their thoughts, receive feedback and then ultimately write the paper the teacher mentions.

Any learning activity can benefit from reflection. Our last blog classroom example from Anne Davis—a fifth-grade teacher in the southern United States—exemplifies how a classroom blog helped these students reflect on what they had learned about the writing process via their blogging activities (Richardson, 2010). At The Write Weblog (<http://itc.blogs.com/thewriteweblog>), every student has blogged and reflected on the blogging impact on writing over the space of about two to three months. Figure 7.9 shows an excerpt from two postings; one from “Alejandro” and another from “Maria” reflecting on blogging and writing.

Returning to ideas presented earlier in this chapter, we recall that students' lack of confidence in writing is often an impediment to developing their writing skills. Maria in particular seems to be aware of specific strategies she has learned—that of using “your voice.” Although these posts do not provide proof of Alejandro's or Maria's improved writing skills, even the belief that they have improved—as they've expressed—may be considered a positive outcome.

Figure 7.9

Student Blog Postings Reflecting on Writing and Blogs

Long Live Blogs

I had read a story on Inappropriate Comments made by Mrs. Davis. I was surprised that other people don't trust other people can have a chance to write in blogs. Besides, if we get a bad comment we can just delete it with a click of a button. Those people that don't trust us are wrong that we can't blog because blogs are what make people better at writing. I also think that we should be able to blog because ever since the weblog group started blogging, all of us have improved on our writing skills. Also, once I saw on CNN that people are getting bad grades on writing. Weblogs will help you on your writing skills and help you be a better writer. The people that want to end blogs should at least give us chance to explain to them that blogs are helpful because you can express your feelings and problems. . . .

I Have Learned A Lot!

I have learned many things throughout the year from weblogs. When I first came to weblog group I really didn't like writing as much as I do now. The biggest deal for me that I have learned is to use your voice. I have learned that my voice counts in my writing. When you use your voice in your writing it shows your personality. In your own writing you should always write about your opinion. I've also learned how to organize my weblog and how to make it the way I feel it should be. . . . If I had the chance to write on weblogs next year in 6th grade I would love to . . .

Finally, we note that all of these blog examples—that we consider illustrate positive points—go beyond some typical but limited uses of blogs (e.g., journaling only, only posting assignments, or simply posting links) that may not realize the potential of the tool. As Richardson (2010) describes, the potential strength of blogs is to not only communicate, but to connect, and such blogging activities require more effort. Our next section briefly provides some considerations for creating blogging tasks that promote meaningful learning.

What to Consider When Using Blogging

Although blogs can give students a wide audience for their writing, art, and other creative works, their unstructured format may result in postings that have little educational value for the students constructing them. To ensure that students are using blogs in ways that support significant learning, teachers need to clearly define the intended objectives for learning and determine whether a blog is the best instructional tool for meeting those objectives. Perhaps the objective is simply for students to engage in informal personal writing, but more than likely teachers will need to provide some guidance and structure to help students meet more complex objectives. For instance, even though some of our blog writing examples are from elementary students, Richardson (2010) suggests that the more advanced analytical thinking required of ongoing blogging activities (such as the Newly Ancient blog, Figure 7.7) may not be feasible for younger students.

By letting students choose their blog entry purpose or structure, their blog writing may be scaffolded such as was illustrated in the “Te Ao O Tamaki” blog. Spammers and other unwanted visitors can be avoided by using blog programs that require a secure log-in. Teachers must provide guidelines and clearly communicate the guidelines along with the reasons for security concerns. Students’ blog entries should be identified by only first names, pseudonyms, or other nonidentifiable labels. Previewing student blog entries before posting can also help teachers feel comfortable with the content and safety of blogging, especially if a public forum is used. Lastly, providing a scoring guide or other means for communicating expectations can help students use blogs more effectively (see Chapter 10 on assessment).

Finally, there are many online blog sites that allow educators to create blogs for their students. Blogspot, EduBlogs, Bloglines, and Blogger are just a few, but the landscape of these tools is constantly changing. If you are looking for blogging software, we suggest you talk to your colleagues, but also refer to such resources as the following. These sites all provide lists of blogging software as well as some annotations on their features (e.g., privacy or filtering controls built in for students).

Kathy Schrock’s Guide for Educators, <http://school.discoveryeducation.com/schrockguide/edtools.html> (look under Web 2.0 tools)

50 Blogging Tools for Teachers, www.teachingtips.com/blog/2008/07/21/50-useful-blogging-tools-for-teachers

Other Internet Publishing Tools

Clearly the growth of the use of blogs in educational settings has been tremendous over the last couple of years, but they are not the only tool available for learners wishing to publish